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JOHN BROWN AFTER FIFTY YEARS *

BY W. D. HOWELLS

THERE are two men in the history of our States whose lives are of such a lasting spell that wherever you see their names in print you must stay and read what is said of them. To the end of imaginable time, mankind will be bound by an irresistible fascination when men write or speak of John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. So different as they were in their lives in their deaths they are not divided, because they both died by the power of slavery: slavery in its supremacy, slavery in its extremity. There will be new biographies of them in each new generation, for each new generation will wish to have its own light turned upon them, but so far as concerns John Brown, it is scarcely to be denied that Mr. Oswald Garrison Villard has given us a biography which must remain the storehouse of the significant and the insignificant facts for every biographer hereafter. In its masses and details of accumulation we must regard it as materials of history rather than history, but if we consider it more carefully and examine its tempered and moralized judgments, we cannot well refuse it the acceptance due to history, though its make and its manner are the make and the manner of that contemporaneous history called journalism than rather the more literary sort.

The first great striking effect of the book is that it forces us who lived through the John Brown time, in love and honor of him, to question our unqualified reverence and affection, and allow that if he was greatly sinned against he also greatly sinned. It will not avail us to say to ourselves that in doing the murders on the Pottawatomie he acted from a high sense of duty and in the belief that he was obeying a sort of divine instruction or was stemming greater blood-

* JOHN BROWN. 1800-1859. A Biography Fifty Years After. By Oswald Garrison Villard. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1910.

shed by shedding blood. What he was really doing by his word if not his hand was taking men from their beds, and because of their opinions cutting their throats and lopping their limbs in the night and leaving their dead bodies for their widowed and orphaned families to find in the morning. This is the pitiless truth of the facts which this biography now supplies, but which Brown so disguised to his own conscience and shuffled out of the public knowledge that he never openly regretted or repented them, and that almost all who revered him as a martyr to the cause of the slave remained ignorant of the wicked deed which had made it also the cause of the homicide. On the ground which he held Cromwell could justify himself to us for his slaughter of the Irish; De Montfort, leading his crusade against the Albigenses, could persuade us that he was right in his indiscriminate butchery of Catholic and Heretic because he believed that "God would know His own."

Like these two men, Brown was a Puritan, for both the ruthless Crusader and the ruthless Parliamentarian were Puritans. But it was Brown's fate to be born out of his time and so near a time when his faith in his divine authorization cannot justify an action which is now for the first time, after fifty years, submitted to the world in all its deformity. If any of us truly believe peace is right and war is wrong; that no good end can justify bad means; that though without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, it is the blood shed by the martyr and not by the murderer which shall save us—then we must condemn Brown for what he did in the night on the Pottawatomie, or worse yet, made others do for him. The deed haunts the story of his whole life thereafter and his life theretofore; it throws its malign gleam forward upon the hero of the scaffold at Charlestown and backward on the father in his simple Ohio home bidding his sons kneel round him and share his oath never to cease warring upon slavery.

A prime virtue of Mr. Villard's book is that it realizes to you the wonderful unity of Brown's life, the "continual purpose" that ran through his life from the hour when he began to think to the hour when he ceased to breathe. If to dwell perpetually upon one idea is monomania, then John Brown was a monomaniac; yet he was not quite a monomaniac, for concurrently with his relentless hostilities of will and deed against slavery ran the purposes and business ac-

tivities of the ordinary man. He was not only a hero at heart, but in head and hand he was an average farmer, an excellent tanner and an enterprising wool merchant, as well as an eager litigant. It was partly the exigencies of industry and commerce in a new country which made him a wanderer; but no doubt it was also the restlessness of the appointed spirit which drove him from Ohio to Massachusetts and from Massachusetts to the North Woods in New York. When the Border Ruffian war in Kansas broke out its flame lighted his way to the opportunity of his strenuous soul, and the making of a name which cannot fade till it is forgotten that there was ever an American democracy based half upon slavery and half upon liberty, and that through him more than through any other man it ceased to be divided against itself.

To such readers of this life of John Brown as lived through the days and years of Bleeding Kansas, it will seem the biography of their own emotions and impulses, if not experiences, and will have an appeal which none later born can feel. These can hardly imagine the intensity of sympathy in the non-combatant witnesses on both sides, or the frenzy of anxiety and resentment with which they followed the small events of the mighty struggle between liberty and slavery as it raged "in that naked country." But here it all lives again, and the ageing reader can see himself as in a glass darkly on every page of this curiously fascinating book. The repeal of that compromise between the North and South by which both sections had long agreed that slavery should not be carried beyond a certain line and the opening of the new territory to it; the instant rush of the Free State men and the Slave State men into the new territory; the nefarious support of the proslavery side by the national Government; the holding of the antagonistic conventions to frame constitutions establishing or forbidding slavery; the succession of Governors Presidentially appointed to aid the Slave State politicians; the successive conversion of these Governors into friends of freedom; the fighting that began as soon as the inimical factions met; the open murder, the ruthless pillage and outrage which went on from bad to worse from the first; the disorder bred in men by the habit of slavery catching to the men bred to order by the habit of liberty; the invited immigrations from both sections; the subsidized resistance to the forms

of law where there was no law but that of the stronger arm: these were the events and the facts which reported themselves with electrical shocks to the nervous centres of the whole country on either side of Mason and Dixon's Line. Then, out of the distant indefinite tumult rose a strange personality, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, which yet most men in the East had no clear sense of or could well distinguish from other figures which seemed of equal significance and importance.

This figure was John Brown, but no one fitly sized it till suddenly, after fading almost mystically from Kansas, it suddenly flashed out, gigantic, colossal, and filled the sky at Harper's Ferry. Some thought it a myth, some a joke, some a miracle; but as it resolved itself into a reality and began to reveal itself in its full material absurdity, its spiritual magnificence, every detail of the man's personality lent it an increasing impressiveness, an increasing persuasiveness. It seemed then as if the thing Brown had attempted were feasible and practicable, and very doubtful means consecrated the end and hallowed it. It appeared through the constantly repeated and often unauthorized interrogations of the wounded prisoner that his simple plan was to rouse the slaves to an attempt at escape from bondage and to arm them for defence and resistance and so render slavery through the whole South anxious and insecure until it must involuntarily abolish itself. He intended no such thing as a servile insurrection in the sense which the South had always dreaded, and from which it was really always so safe through the ignorance and the fear of the slaves. He said what he had meant, at first with something of the shuffling by which he had hid his complicity in the Pottawatomie murders, but with increasing distinctness till he convinced of his truth those who wished most to believe in his falsehood.

If the witnesses of the struggle in distant Kansas had thrilled and shuddered, now they were possessed with little less than delirium by the preposterous, the terrible event at Harper's Ferry. To the readers of this generation Mr. Villard's book will give a clear and just idea of the situation; to the readers of that generation it will seem ablaze with the fires that raged in every breast. Only, in its unvarying and admirable justice it will be to the Southern survivor his fire as to the Northern survivor it will be his

fire. I do not think one could praise it too much for its frankness and impartiality, though it would be easier for the partisan of Brown to praise it more if it had been less frank and less impartial. Yet I think such a partisan, if he will look carefully and calmly at the result, will own that this impartiality, which sometimes seems grudging, is the medium through which Brown appears grandest and finest. His perfect behavior after the failure of his attempt up to the very moment of his death has confused history a little as to the real nature of his attempt; something of the uncertainty of his means has involved the character of the fact. But this nature and this character can be made clear to the present generation of Mr. Villard's readers if we will suppose Brown to be now living amidst the actual conditions.

There is a large and largely increasing number of conscientious Americans who regard the prevalent system of capitalism with the abhorrence that Brown felt for the system of Southern slavery. They regard it as industrial slavery, and it seems to them as abominably unjustifiable as chattel slavery seemed to him. To their minds, nothing can be said in defence of it, and tacitly or explicitly their souls are vowed to its destruction. Tacitly or explicitly, they accuse it of all the economic misery of the world, of all the forms of poverty and depravity. It is not necessary to determine whether they are right or wrong in their view of capitalism; it is sufficient that they hold it and that the system is conscious of its insecurity for this reason. If, then, we imagine one of these men, these Americans, so far out of date as to be imbued with the Puritanic spirit of John Brown, and vowed explicitly to the destruction of capitalism by any and every means, and ready to act against it at the first opportunity, we shall have some notion of the John Brown of fifty years ago in his enmity to slavery. To him slavery meant the slaveholder, as to the John Brown of to-day capitalism means the capitalist. Then he could not conceive of a slaveholder as a good man, as now he could not conceive of a capitalist as a good man, though we all know that there were once many slaveholders who would gladly have been rid of slavery, and there are now many capitalists who are not at rest in capitalism; or who, at least, seem anxious to get rid of the money made by it, as many slaveholders seem to have been anxious to get rid of their slaves.

But supposing our latter-day John Brown to have taken part in those conflicts against capitalism which we constantly witness in the strikes of one form of labor or another, and to have seen violence prevail in certain of those conflicts, and capitalism forced to yield at this point or that, we have him of a mood to go, say, to Pittsburg, as the John Brown of fifty years ago went to Harper's Ferry. In his raid upon that capitalistic centre he could hardly have formed plans more vague and provisional than the old John Brown had formed in his raid upon Virginia. It would not matter whether he lurked in the uplands of the vicinity with a small band of devoted followers and a store of pikes for arming the revolting proletariat; it would not matter whether he kidnapped a few millionaires until he could perfect some scheme for reaching the heart of capitalism and at least striking a mortal terror into it. What would matter for the sake of our parallel would be that he should have had such a Puritanic conscience that he would be willing to die for the cause he was vowed to, and that he should be as ready to spill the blood of others as his own blood.

Does any one believe that if his band were taken with arms in their hands, and the captive millionaires in their keeping, they would have had as dispassionate and even scrupulous a trial as the Virginians gave John Brown and his men? The Chicago anarchists might answer this if they were alive to speak. Seven of them were tried together and in a lump sentenced to die for a crime perpetrated by a man never yet identified. All but one of them was absent from the scene and several were miles away. The only one present when the deadly bomb was thrown by the still unknown assassin was there with his wife and children at a meeting which the police were dispersing. He with three or four others was put to death on evidence purely circumstantial, and his fellow conspirators were sent to prison for life or long years. Such was the fate of men who meditated or intended the beginning of the end of the order called capitalism. Surely, in view of the facts, it is time for us who once believed that John Brown and his comrades were unjustly hurried to their death to recognize the different behavior of the order called slavery when it was assailed under circumstances of incomparably greater violence. These men were taken with arms in their hands after they had shed the blood of peaceful people about them, and

while they held in captivity the unarmed neighbors whom they had surprised by night in their homes and carried with them for their own greater security. They had possessed themselves of Government property, and they were making a Government arsenal their fortress against United States troops and the astonished and outraged citizens of the little town and the country round about it.

The Virginian authorities behaved with ridiculous pomp and circumstance enough; they were astounded and bewildered too, and we young journalists at the safe distance of Ohio and elsewhere found them immensely amusing. We had our fun out of the whole affair, which indeed appeared of a wildly exaggerated impossibility. But now, after a lapse of fifty years and our witness of the equally ludicrous spectacle of Chicago frightened from her propriety by the Haymarket incident, we ought to acknowledge, we young journalists and all the others who survive in the youth of the John Brown time, that in the retrospect the Virginians seem to have behaved well. Of course it was inevitable that they should put John Brown and his men to death; that was a foregone conclusion to which all the facts of the case tended. But the accused were allowed to sever; they were not tried and sentenced in a lump; they were given able counsel by the State and volunteer attorneys from the North were allowed to act for them. They were all treated by the court with respect, and as time went on Brown was treated with something like reverence.

His whole attitude was one to inspire reverence. After those first moments of something like shuffling away from the curiosity of the eagles who gathered rather like geese where his bleeding carcase was in the engine-house at Harper's Ferry, and he could pull himself together and look his inevitable fate in the face, he confronted it without flinching and with absolute truth. From his perfect courage he discouraged in others every hope of his escape. He realized and he said, with his homely sublimity, that he was worth more to hang than anything else, and while he did not seek the scaffold he did nothing to shun it. At last he was fulfilling his vow; he was doing his utmost against slavery. He was dealing it from his bonds and prison the deadliest blow it remained for him to deliver and a far deadlier blow than any freest agency could give. Once before, by a deed which all his friends and lovers must deplore, he flung the forces of

liberty and slavery in conflict together, and now again his prophet soul divined that in giving his own life he was doing infinitely more than he did in taking the lives of others. Then he planned the collision of a few scattered foes in the empty West; now from the oldest and densest populations of the continent his mighty arms were to draw the factors of a struggle unmatched in history and embattle them against one another in a war of principles: not alone the principles of liberty and slavery, but also the principles of provinciality and nationality; and his wild deed was to evoke from the elemental materials of our life the being of the mightiest republic under the sun. Nothing of all this in its ultimatum, its definition, did he forecast; he only knew, he only felt that his destructiveness had been created in him; and that out of his lifelong enmity to slavery, concentrated and precipitated in a single blow, wandering and misdirected, had come the end of slavery.

In his fine last chapter, which he aptly calls "Yet shall he live," Mr. Villard has risen to the occasion with an adequacy not always to have been predicated of him. Here he has drawn together the threads of his logic, which is the logic of events, in the high conclusion that Brown triumphed in what he suffered rather than in what he did. Here again he enforces the divine truth that if without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, it is by the shedding of one's own blood and not by the shedding of others' blood. It is self-sacrifice which makes the sinner over from a hero into a martyr. Not by smiting off the ear of the high priest's servant in his wrath at Jerusalem, but by dying for his faith at Rome, did Peter become the Rock on which Christ founded His church. The lesson of all wars is peace: when will the nations learn it? The lesson of the holiest war, if ever carnage can be hallowed, is no other than that of the wickedest war. John Brown was ready all his life to die for freedom; the great pity and the great sin was that he was ready to make others die for it: against it preferably, but in defence of it if need be. He lived in a dreadful time, a time when it seemed that there would never be an end of buying and selling men and women and little children, of scourging them to unpaid tasks, and of chasing them with bloodhounds when they tried to escape from their hell. He lived when the soul of the North had been insulted by the Fugitive Slave Law, and men were forbidden,

under heavy pains, to feed or shelter the wretch fleeing from bondage. He lived when the South broke its sacred promise to respect a Northern limit of slavery and used the whole strength of the Government to desecrate free territory with human bondage. It is now an almost incredible time, and what wonder if in such a time it should be incredible that there were any good men trammelled in slaveholding or that slaveholders were not all alike willing and wicked and equally worthy of death through the aggressions of slavery? John Brown belonged to that time, but he belonged also by his iron faith to an earlier time, and he believed in the sword of the Lord and of Gideon, as Cromwell did, and far more is the pity, as Milton did. This life of him makes us realize his error while we realize the sublimity of his death and own him, if no saint, always a hero and martyr.

W. D. HOWELLS.